



Government Accountability and Oversight Committee

STAFF REPORT

Agenda Item:	4	Name:	Mike Alvine
Proposed No.:	2011-B0133	Date:	August 16, 2011
Invited:	Honorable Sherril Huff, Director of Elections, King County		

SUBJECT: Briefing on Election Data: Costs, Voter Turnout, and Accuracy

SUMMARY:

This briefing provides historical data on elections using three objective measures: 1) cost of elections; 2) voter turnout and 3) accuracy of reconciling ballots. This is the first time such a data set has been put together for King County and perhaps for any county in Washington State.

BACKGROUND:

As part of its oversight activities, the Government Accountability and Oversight Committee reviews data and other information on the performance of County programs. At the request of the Committee Chair, Council staff reviewed data provided by Elections on the three measures previously identified. Cost data and voter turnout data cover a nine-year period (2002 – 2010). Ballot reconciliation data starts with the General Election of 2005 and runs through the Special Elections of 2011. (State law began the requirement to reconcile ballots starting with the General Election of 2005.)

A number of important changes occurred in the administration of elections from 2002 to 2010 that makes analyzing the data challenging. Perhaps the most significant change in Washington State elections was the county-by-county transition to all-mail elections. In 2005 the Washington State Legislature amended 29A RCW, giving authority to counties to conduct elections entirely by mail. In 2009 King County joined nearly every other county in the state by moving to all-mail elections with the spring Special Elections.

ANALYSIS:

The data on which this report relies comes from the Elections Department, and is comparable to and standard for all counties across Washington. Cost information is required to be kept for billing purposes under state law, as is ballot reconciliation information. Turnout information is not required to be kept by state law or County Code, but Elections keeps this

data available because of strong public interest in it. Ballot reconciliation information is required to be reported to the Secretary of State after each election.

Election Costs

State law governs what costs can be charged for elections and how those costs are distributed among jurisdictions and taxing districts. As a result, King County keeps very good historical records of election costs. Table 1 below shows King County's historical election costs for special elections, primary elections and general elections for non-presidential election years. Table 2 displays the same data for presidential election years. The data has been presented in this way because Primary and General elections held in presidential election years typically have higher turnout and cost significantly more. For discussion purposes, it may be helpful to focus on the column labeled Total Annual Cost.

Looking at Table 1, Total Annual Costs rise from a low of just over \$7 million in 2002 to a high of approximately \$12.6 million in 2010. The shaded rows for 2009 and 2010 highlight the years where King County held all-mail elections.

Table 1 – Historical Elections Costs, Non-presidential Election Years									
Year	Reg. Active Voters	Special Feb.	Special March	Special April	Special May	Primary	General	Total Annual Cost	Cost per voter
2002	4,644,835	1,609,070	164,274	126,328	147,157	2,320,419	2,650,389	7,017,637	\$1.51
2003	13,453,990	1,058,922	64,497	107,887	1,562,805	2,561,898	3,008,826	8,364,835	\$0.62
2005	10,661,851	89,235	0	274,363	86,675	3,942,786	5,110,082	9,503,142	\$0.89
2006	3,628,630	1,780,595	247,258	0	437,294	4,395,788	4,650,465	11,511,399	\$3.17
2007	11,523,874	1,301,819	1,045,853	0	290,649	3,720,866	5,819,914	12,179,102	\$1.06
2009	11,940,504	2,048,782	143,517	0	0	4,118,444	5,625,641	11,936,384	\$1.00
2010	7,025,184	\$3,392,833	\$0	\$170,170	\$0	\$3,984,150	\$5,006,021	\$12,553,175	\$1.79
Shaded rows are vote by mail elections.									

A number of factors have influenced the cost of elections over this time period such as the passage of federal and state laws (notably Washington State Senate Bill 5499 (Attachment 3) governing the administration of elections. These changes increased the accountability and transparency of elections, but they also added more complicated administrative and ballot accounting procedures.

Table 2 – Historical Elections Costs, Presidential Election Years									
Year	Reg. Active Voters	Special Feb.	Special March	Special April	Special May	Primary	General	Total Annual Cost	Cost per voter
2004	4,554,873	1,102,506	128,612	57,903	347,328	3,530,373	4,107,041	9,273,763	\$2.04
2008	5,171,392	3,986,195	632,237	0	190,224	4,220,304	7,834,195	16,863,151	\$3.26

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Looking at Table 2, presidential year election costs go from \$9.2 million in 2004 to \$16.9 million in 2008. Elections staff identify a number of factors for the high costs in 2008. These include:

- 2008 was a presidential election year that resulted in the highest voter turnout in a decade (see Table 4). This required hiring many more seasonal staff than normal, at a cost of \$1.9 million.
- Regular permanent staff also worked significant overtime at a cost of \$765,000 because of the volume of work during this particular presidential election year.
- 2008 was the first year Elections was a separate department. Previously a little over half of their administrative expenses were shared with, Records and Licensing Services.
- Elections began paying for its new facility in 2008, incurring \$2.6 million in new costs.
- Overall, elections staff report that the cost of being an independent agency, moving into a separate facility and the major presidential year election resulted in new costs of \$5.8 million.

Looking at both Table 1 and Table 2, it is interesting to note that even with the ongoing costs of the new facility and the inability to spread administrative costs, total election costs drop back to near the 2007 level in 2010. This suggests that the Elections Department has found ways to cut other costs in order to absorb these new costs. There appear to be two likely sources of cost savings: (1) efficiencies and (2) lower costs due to all-mail elections. The Citizens' Elections Oversight Committee, established by the King County Council, has noted in its annual reports that the Elections Department has indeed found innovative ways to use its new ballot scanning and tabulation equipment to cut costs. In addition, moving to all-mail elections has resulted in a significant drop in hiring of temporary employees. During poll voting years, between 2,000 and 3,000 temporary workers were hired. With all-mail elections between 200 and 300 temporary employees are hired for each large election.

Voter Turnout

Table 3 below shows voter turnout for Special, Primary and General elections in King County for non-presidential election years. The conventional wisdom is that voter turnout is primarily a function of what offices and measures are on a particular ballot.

Table 3 – Election Turnout History, Non-presidential Elections									
Special Elections				Primary Elections			General Elections		
Year	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout
2002	1,700,628	451,719	26.6%	1,069,573	282,987	26.5%	1,031,348	548,353	53.2%
2003	2,089,488	590,620	28.3%	1,029,833	304,217	29.5%	1,035,764	369,779	35.7%
2005	220,404	72,611	32.9%	1,012,559	300,569	29.7%	1,017,995	547,325	53.8%
2006	1,496,58	473,468	31.6%	955,132	342,195	35.8%	974,340	635,753	65.3%

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*2007	915,644	337,900	36.9%	999,134	248,964	24.9%	994,798	465,999	46.8%
2009	1,145,696	262,612	22.9%	1,090,964	344,712	31.6%	1,079,842	574,298	53.6%
2010	1,692,171	622,785	36.8%	1,074,731	406,391	38.0%	1,069,791	766,477	71.0%
2011	238,983	97,864	41.0%	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

* City of Seattle vote-by-mail election

Shaded rows are vote by mail elections.

Looking at Table 3, it is interesting to note that voting by mail appears to have made no difference in election turnout. Special Election turnout ranges from a low of 22.9 percent in 2009 to a high of 41 percent in 2011 – both vote-by-mail elections. During poll voting, turnout for Special Elections ranged from a low of 26.6 percent in 2002 to a high of 36.9 percent in 2007. These observations appear to validate the conventional wisdom that turnout is more a function of offices and measures on a particular ballot.

Looking at Table 4, the Primary and General Elections are the most affected by the presidential election. The Primary Election of 2008 was surprisingly low at about 35 percent compared with just over 46 percent in 2004. Turnout in the general elections was nearly equal in 2004 and 2008 at a little over 83 percent.

Table 4 – Election Turnout History, Presidential Elections									
Special Elections ¹				Primary Election			General Election		
Year	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout	Registered Voters	Total Votes	Turnout
2004	804,769	237,532	29.5%	1,006,839	466,732	46.4%	1,082,406	899,199	83.1%
2008	1,412,318	471,218	33.4%	1,041,892	363,197	34.9%	1,108,128	930,038	83.9%

Accuracy – Ballot Reconciliation

In 2005 the state legislature approved Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5499 (Attachment 3) which included a broad range of election administration reforms, bringing greater accountability and transparency to the election process. Among these was the requirement that election administrators, on the day of certification, file a report with the Secretary of State that “reconciles” or reports the number of voters and the status of ballots returned to the elections office. Thirty days following certification, election administrators must file a final version of this report. The information required is listed below and taken directly from the bill.

- The number of registered voters;

¹ The methodology for calculating voter turnout for special elections was to add together all the active registered voters in those specific jurisdictions that had an office or measure on the ballot for the Special Elections in each year, and then add all the ballots cast in those elections, and then divide the total ballots cast by the number of active registered voters in the relevant jurisdictions. This was necessary because the number of Special Elections can vary from year to year.

- The total number of voters credited with voting;
- The number of poll voters credited with voting; [no longer applicable]
- The number of provisional voters credited with voting;
- The number of absentee voters credited with voting; [All ballots are “absentee” or mail ballots now.]
- The number of federal write-in voters credited with voting;
- The number of out-of-state, overseas, and service voters credited with voting;
- The total number of voters credited with voting even though their ballots were postmarked after Election Day and were not counted;
- Any other information the auditor deems necessary to reconcile the number of ballots counted with the number of voters credited with voting.

Accuracy data is presented in three tables. Table 5 shows ballot reconciliation information for ballots processed in the Elections headquarters. Table 6 shows Primary Election ballot reconciliation information for poll sites, while Table 7 shows poll reconciliation data for General Elections.

These reports are commonly referred to as the reconciliation reports and they have contributed greatly to the public’s understanding of elections and to the transparency of the process. Table 5 below provides reconciliation data for mail ballots process in the central elections facility.

Table 5 – Headquarters Ballot Reconciliation Data				
Year	Primary Elec. Discrepancies.	# of Ballots Processed	General Elect. Discrepancies	# of Ballots Processed
2005	na*	na*	23	395,531
2006	25	281,415	51	451,373
2007	3	224,007	2	361,913
2008	2	331,027	4	656,565
2009	1	353,239	0	587,198
2010	0	421,157	0	786,461
Shaded rows are vote-by-mail elections.				

* Ballot reconciliation was not required until the General Election of 2005.

Table 5 shows a consistent improvement in accounting for every mail ballot received by King County Elections. Accuracy over the last four years is remarkable with individual ballot discrepancies in the low single digits to zero in 2010 for both the Primary and General elections. To understand the high level of performance and quality control, one must consider the number of ballots processed in any primary or general election versus the number of discrepancies. In looking at Table 5, one should remember that in 2009 and 2010 all the ballots processed were mail ballots.

Tables 6 and 7 below present accuracy data for polling places, however this data is in a different format, and it not fully comparable with Table 5.

Table 6 – Polling Place Ballot Reconciliation Data – Primary Elections

Year	Polling Places	Crossover Votes	Precincts not Balanced	Primary Ballots Cast
2006	509	266	30	66,429
2007	407	185	11	29,583
2008	393	48	8	59,057

Table 7 – Polling Place Ballot Reconciliation Data – General Elections				
Year	Polling Places	Crossover Votes	Precincts not Balanced	Primary Ballots Cast
2006	509	354	35	181,322
2007	407	241	21	107,240
2008	392	158	49	254,663

Polling place reconciliation data had to be retrieved from archives. This was the most detailed data that could be retrieved in the time available to prepare this report. Polling place reconciliation data for the General Election of 2005 was not found in archives so the data set only includes the years 2006, 2007 and 2008. The most important difference between data in Table 5 and the data in Tables 6 and 7 is that the “discrepancy” data in Table 5 refers to individual ballots not accounted for while “Precincts not Balanced” only identifies the number of precincts not balanced leaving the total number of ballots not accounted for unknown.

Another important data element in Tables 6 and 7 is that “crossover votes” are identified. A crossover vote is when a voter is handed the wrong ballot at a polling site and votes that ballot. With ballot reconciliation it became possible to quantify the number of crossover votes. Previously elections staff suspected crossover voting was occurring, but the scale of the phenomenon was not known. Crossover voting is almost nonexistent for mail ballots because of the multiple quality control checks that are done when ballots are placed into envelopes for individual voters.

Looking at the data in Table 6 for Primary Elections, it is clear that accuracy was consistently improving with crossover votes and the number of precincts not balancing continuing to decline each year. This reflects the increased training the Elections Department invested in temporary workers.

In reviewing the data in Table 7 for General Elections, the number of crossover votes showed consistent improvement over time. However the number of precincts that did not balance while declining from 35 to 21 in 2007 increased to 49 in 2008, the last year of poll voting.

Perhaps the most striking observation that can be made looking at Tables 5, 6 and 7 is that if one compares the number of individual ballot discrepancies to the number of total ballots cast in Table 5 with the number of polling place precincts not balanced to the total number of ballots cast at the polls in Tables 6 and 7, it is clear that the more controlled environment of a headquarters central count facility allows for better accuracy.

Next Steps

Now that this analytical format has been developed and the data are available on a regular basis, the GAO Committee may wish to use this format for an annual review of Elections, in addition to the ongoing briefings on specific matters. Elections leadership

has indicated support for this idea as it is a straightforward, concise way to summarize key information about elections to the public.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Ordinance 15523
2. Ordinance 16557
3. Senate Bill 5499